Community Engagement, Social Responsibility & Social Work Profession

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I am honoured to be invited to deliver this keynote address on the occasion of the Third Indian Social Work Congress (ISWC), 2015, in Ladnun, jointly organized by National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI) and Department of Social Work, Jain Visva Bharati University, Ladnun, Rajasthan.

We are living in challenging times. On one hand, humanity today is enjoying unprecedented gains in improvement of living standards. Educational levels are soaring; life expectancy has increased; access to information and opportunities for participation have grown exponentially. These are indeed impressive gains within our lifetime – these improvements in standards of living for all humanity are phenomena of the past half century, or less. The world today has wealth, technologies, knowledge, capacities and institutions that previous generations did not possess or even dream of; global air travel and even visits to space are now possible with ease. Yet, we live in an era of enormous and growing discontent. There has been widespread rise in inequality within and across societies; highly consumptive lifestyles have caused widespread environmental degradation and severe climate changes; violence against girls and women continues unabated.

As these accelerated changes pose challenges to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), they are obligated as agents of knowledge creation, exchange and dissemination to become more conscious of their importance and responsibility towards society, to address and redefine their traditional roles, to review their perspectives on social responsibility and to consider its implications. This cannot be accomplished with the help of an educational model which thrives on old ways of thinking. Thus, the time is ripe for reviewing and reconsidering the interchange of value between university and society; that is to say, we need to begin thinking on the lines of social relevance of higher education in general and professional education in particular.

In India, the concept of community engagement of HEIs is slowly and steadily gaining ground. Policy makers have started realizing the importance of this concept, and its integration into regular academic discourse. In line with this, last year the University Grants Commission (UGC) launched a scheme on fostering community engagement in universities. This scheme provides for the establishment of Centres for Social Responsibility and Community Engagement (CFSRCE) in universities. Along with this, other agencies in the field of higher education have also been conscious of this area of work, and have been making efforts in this direction. To name a few, the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) has expressed its interest in promoting such engagement in universities and colleges and has sought PRIA's help to pursue this further. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has also included community engagement as an important criterion in assessing the performance of universities. The National Universities Ranking System proposed by the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) also considers the social contribution of universities an important parameter in ranking universities.

Community Engagement

Higher Education Institutions relate to their surrounding communities in performing some functions. They are mostly construed as serving their core missions of teaching, research and service through the

various functions they perform. Engagement of HEIs with communities is mostly viewed through the lens of service. It is important to note here that the engagement function of HEIs with respect to communities is not limited to its service function alone, and encompasses the other missions of teaching and research as well. When we talk about engagement vis-à-vis higher education, it signifies mutual exchange of knowledge between universities and communities in an attempt to produce an output which is of benefit to larger society. Such engagement is possible through the teaching and research function of the university, as much as it is through its service function.

According to the erstwhile Planning Commission,

> *Community engagement should not be seen as an 'addition' to learning and teaching, but intrinsic to it. This is essential if education is to be a vehicle for social transformation and attainment of social justice, rather than as a means to individual prosperity alone, if education is to be a public good rather than merely a commodity. For this, institutions of higher education need to locate their learning and teaching in the communities in which they are located, and to harness the idealism and dynamism of the youth.* (Planning Commission, 2011)

In line with this school of thought, more and more institutions (such as Bundelkhand University, Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati, Barkatullah University, Mysore University, etc.) have come to recognize that traditional extension and outreach programs, though important and necessary, are not sufficient to heal the rift between higher education and public life. What is required is an approach that extends beyond service and outreach to actual 'engagement'. By this, we mean that there is a need to move from a model of 'public service', where universities do things for a 'passive and needy public', to one of 'public work' that taps, engages and develops the civic agency, talents and capacities of everyone, inside and outside the university. This is an 'engaged model of university outreach' which is far more collaborative than the customary one.

Community University Engagement (CUE) as a concept implies relationships between universities and communities which are mutually beneficial and adopt a bi-directional flow of information between the two. This engagement between universities and communities can be at the local, regional, national or even virtual levels, and is aimed at the co-creation of knowledge which is beneficial to society at large. Such engagement deviates from the normal outreach/extension functions, to an approach which is more participative and committed to the co-creation and sharing of knowledge. Where the institution and the community are involved in a common enterprise, it gives added depth and meaning to traditional concepts like 'service' and 'outreach', by making the community a partner in academic knowledge. Across the world, colleges, universities and academic associations are striving to make civic engagement an integral part of the way they do their work. This gives rise to the concept of 'engaged universities' (UNESCO Chair, 2015).

Higher education, which is generally organized into highly specialized disciplines, needs to make such a paradigm shift towards a more systemic perspective, emphasizing collaboration, cooperation and partnership (UNESCO Chair, 2015). In order to do this, it is important that an institutional mechanism is

developed to adopt a holistic and functional approach to community engagement based on the following core principles (Tandon, 2014):

i) *Mutually agreed interests and needs of both communities and institutions be articulated and respected;*

ii) *Engagement must encompass all the three functions of institutions of higher education – teaching, research and outreach/practice;*

iii) *Institutional engagement cutting across disciplines and faculties should be mandated, including natural sciences, and not restricted to social and human sciences alone;*

iv) *Participation in community engagement projects by students should earn them credits and partially meet graduation requirements and it should be integrated into their evaluation systems;*

v) *Performance assessments of teachers, researchers and administrators in such institutions should include this dimension of community engagement.*

Social Responsibility

Recent trends towards increasing global inter-connectedness have been creating a somewhat distinctive new social order. There are several aspects of this social order that are relevant to our conversations today, at the third ISWC.

First, there is an increasingly globalized social connectivity; through the use of new information technology, ease of air travel and new waves of migration, citizenship is no longer confined to local community or nation-state. In some fundamental ways, we are living in a new global society where we are global citizens. We share essential humanity with distant and unknown others. The concept of 'global' or cosmopolitan citizenship challenges the conventional meaning of citizenship as exclusive membership and participation within a territorially bounded political community (Tandon & Gaventa, 2010). Developing a perspective of global citizenship generates capacity to act as global citizens in the face of global challenges of inequality, injustice, violence against women, corruption, climate change, etc. Learning approaches that facilitate preparation of global citizens contribute to such global campaigns effectively.

Second, there is a blurring of distinction between the private sphere and public space. The women's movement in the 1980s began to articulate 'personal is political', thereby bringing into public discourse those aspects of human existence which had been earlier 'demarcated' as personal. Domestic violence against women and children today are the focus of public policy and legislation. Even personal eating and cleaning habits are no longer confined to the private sphere; healthy eating, active lifestyles and personal hygiene are also focus of public policy today.

Third, universalization of certain social norms and values have gained widespread acceptance. Ecological sustainability, gender justice, human rights, respect for diversity and active citizen participation are no longer confined to 'western societies' or the United Nations. These values are now being seen as a part of everyday life everywhere.

Citizens' protests reflect the disconnect between their expectations and the performance of public authorities. Rights, voice and dignity have become part of everyday expectations of all citizens around the world, and in many cases those expectations have not been met (PRIA, 2012). In this sense, the future of humanity will depend on how social responsibility is owned, practiced and accounted for by the various institutions of society. This perspective emphasizes the collective and social nature of responsibility, which is a demand for all institutions to act in a socially responsible manner. The commonplace discourse on social responsibility mostly focuses on the government and corporate institutions (more recently in the debates on CSR, or Corporate Social Responsibility).

The focus on HEIs to act in socially responsible ways is now gaining ascendancy. However, it needs to be noted that social responsibility of HEIs is not about planting trees on a Sunday or cleaning garbage in a slum on Saturday. Social responsibility is about doing research in a responsible and responsive manner; it is about respecting local practitioner knowledge. The idea is to foster meaningful and respectful research partnerships between the university and the community, where the ownership and benefits of accruing results are mutual. A global survey conducted under the project 'Strengthening Community University Research Partnerships' (funded by IDRC Canada and undertaken by the UNESCO Chair), threw up some interesting findings (Tremblay et. al., 2014):

- ✓ Over 95 per cent of all respondents believe that the co-creation of knowledge is a primary goal in Community University Research Partnerships.
- ✓ However, less than 15 per cent of Community University Research Partnerships originate in the community. These partnerships are still very much top down, initiated at the HEI level.
- ✓ Active participation in decision-making and distribution of funds in research projects is predominantly controlled by HEIs.
- ✓ In terms of the criteria most important in a Community University Research Partnership, overwhelmingly respondents agree that trust and mutual respect are essential, but also point to 'funding support for planning and partnership development'.
- ✓ 45 per cent of financial support for Community University Research Partnerships are coming from government; 30 per cent from within HEIs, as opposed to CSOs, which seem to be more self-funded.
- ✓ Just over 60 per cent of HEIs identified in the research have some form of structure created within the last 10 years to support Community University Research Partnerships.

The broad picture which emerges is that the mindset in HEIs continues to negate community knowledge and practitioner expertise. In light of this, widespread systematization of practitioner knowledge and sensitization of next generation researchers has good potential to make a difference.

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) began in 1980 as a network of practitioners involved in awareness generation, community organizing and adult education to empower the poor and marginalized. Participatory Research, the forte of PRIA's work, is a methodology that values experiential knowledge and practitioner's wisdom in addition to the more formal knowledge available in academia and books. In order to bridge the divide between the world of practice and the world of research, PRIA undertakes a number of initiatives to promote engagement of institutions of higher education with civil society and

local communities to foster knowledge generation and mutual learning (PRIA, 2014). As a facilitator, PRIA has continuously made efforts and it aspires to become a regional resource centre for promoting CUE as well as research partnerships between the university and the community. It also partners with various funding agencies such as the British Council, with whom it recently concluded a research study on 'Community Engagement in HEIs' in universities across four states of India. Further, organizations such as IDRC India have also expressed their interest in supporting PRIA's ideas and efforts.

PRIA's approach to promote Community Based Research (CBR) and social responsibility of HEIs can be classified under six inter-linked categories (PRIA, 2014):

1. Linking 'formal' learning and the local community

2. Researching with the community

3. Sharing knowledge with the community

4. Designing new curriculum and courses

5. Involving local practitioners as teachers

6. Building capacities on Participatory Research in academia and influencing academic thinking

Implications of Realizing Social Responsibility in HEIs

What are the implications of the shifting and globalizing meaning of social responsibility for HEIs? Do HEIs have a meaningful contribution to make? How can such contribution be enhanced? Should HEIs do different things to promote social responsibility? Should they adopt nearby slums and communities to help them? Or should HEIs do their core functions differently? What ways of teaching and research as core functions of HEIs would make them more socially responsible?

Answers to the above questions are neither readily available nor universally homogenous. Exploration of answers is the road to discovery in a particular context.

In general, descriptions of the core mission of HEIs, teaching, research and service are defined almost universally. In this approach to defining the core mission of HEIs, service is seen as distinct and apart from, not a part of, the other two core missions of teaching and research. Most universities and HEIs therefore focus their efforts to achieve this service mission to society and its wellbeing independent of their approach to their missions on teaching and research.

How should this change in light of expectations of fulfilling global social responsibility of HEIs?

First, the very function of teaching a new generation has to be critically reviewed. Cristina Escrigas argues that academia has moved away from integrating social responsibility in the core function of teaching (GUNi, 2014):

> *Academia works worldwide training people who will show a way of understanding, of relating, of making decisions and of engaging with the world in which they live through their personal and*

professional activity. Collectively, we are more concerned to teach a specific professional content rather than the 'game rules'; the impacts we create; the deep understanding of reality and a responsible way of thinking and acting – held in conscience and ethics – in the exchange of value with society.

Citizens in India today are more aware, more vocal and more assertive in pursuit of public goods from governance institutions. What do professionals do in such a situation? Do development professionals consider this 'not my work'? Do they become spectators? Or do they also engage? Do they stand by those citizens as citizens? Or do they hide behind their 'professional mask'? The challenge of citizenship ethics demands of professionals to practice ethical citizenship with courage and conviction (Tandon, 2009).

One of the ways to integrate social responsibility with the function of teaching is to review both the curriculum and pedagogy of syllabus, courses and programs being taught in HEIs. A key issue is learning of responsibility and citizenship while acquiring professional knowledge and degrees. Francois Vallaeys (2014) calls it educational impact of social responsibility:

> *Responsible universities ask what kind of professionals and citizens they are shaping and also reflect on the proper organization of education that ensures socially responsible students. What kind of professionals and citizens are we educating? How would we structure our educational system to build citizens who care for sustainable human development? Will our graduates be able and willing to redirect the currently unstable and unjust course of global development or will they simply want to find a job?"*

Once again, there are no easy or clear answers, nor ready-made prescriptions. But, much needs to be desired from the curriculum and pedagogy of higher education in contemporary contexts.

Second, HEIs are viewed as centres of knowledge and knowledge production. Research to produce new knowledge is a major function of HEIs. Many different sources of knowledge have now emerged, including civil society and media. Practitioners' knowledge is being valued in solving practical problems. Multiple forms and modes of knowledge production are now being recognized. New respect is being conferred on indigenous knowledge systems.

One of the important modes of achieving this is Community Based Research (CBR). It is a key mechanism for addressing the inequities in academic knowledge production. CBR can take different shapes and develop a wide range of functional structures that support engagement practices (Hall et. al., 2015). In Latin America, for example, within different disciplines, institutions and contexts CBR practices are commonly embedded within discourses around Participative Research, Participatory Action Research, Action Research, Community Learning, Service-Learning, Participative Learning and Community Development (PRIA, 2000). A global survey on 'Training the Next Generation of Community Based Researchers' (funded by SSHRC, Canada and undertaken by the UNESCO Chair), gives some key pointers (Lepore, 2015):

- ✓ Although 90 per cent of the respondents had previous experience in CBR, 16 per cent were never trained to do CBR.
- ✓ The predominant ways of acquiring CBR capabilities is auto-didactic self-directed learning (56.9 per cent), or self-directed learning (47.7 per cent).
- ✓ Almost a third (30 per cent) of students enrolled in HEIs have never taken community actions or performed creative activities as part of their training in CBR.
- ✓ Among the respondents who are not interested in learning more CBR, over 60 per cent are university professors, while 100 per cent of surveyed students expressed their interest in getting more training in CBR.
- ✓ Almost a third of respondents (31.8 per cent) considered short-term learning experiences (i.e., workshops) as the most useful training they would like to receive in the future, followed by short-term courses (26.3 per cent), online training courses (23.2 per cent), medium-term programs (18.8 per cent) and university courses (15.1 per cent).
- ✓ With respect to preferences in CBR training, African respondents expressed more interest in short-term courses (31.6 per cent) over university courses (6.8 per cent), and Asian respondents preferred workshops (38 per cent) and short-term courses (33.5 per cent) over online training (16.7 per cent). On the other hand, in Latin America, less than 20 per cent of respondents consider workshops as a highly useful training option, but there is a much higher demand for university courses (30.8 per cent), online training (30.5 per cent) and 3-to-6 month courses (25.1 per cent) than in the rest of the world.

There appears to be a high demand and low offer of CBR training opportunities. The main challenge is how to meet the existing demand of training in CBR and how to complement what is offered. There needs to be a mix of training opportunities in every region that includes face-to-face learning, online options, experiential learning, as well as short- and long-term training courses.

Social Work Profession: New Imperatives

The fact that the field of social work is vast and ever-changing needs to be acknowledged. Society today is facing enormous challenges; contemporary model of economic development is increasing inequality; a vast section of society is unable to access basic services and claim entitlements due to them. Professionals in social work can stand by such excluded citizens and communities in ways that empower them. As a profession, a formal degree is not the real basis for professional identity; the values of commitment to the ideals and ethics of service make a profession. In that sense, social work profession can redefine its identity as promotion of active citizenship in making democracy work for all.

However, despite enormous complexity of social realities in the country, social science research has become largely irrelevant today, as students undertaking master's and doctoral level research confine themselves to libraries, or their topics are essentially a 'rehash' of already known themes and topics. While Participatory Research methodologies did get acceptance in academia in the early 1990s, they have not been adequately utilized by students and researchers. The key constraint for this seems to be the absence of long-term trusting relationships with communities. As a result, HEIs continue to be seen as distant and alien by local communities and civil society actors.

The social work profession today needs to redefine its contemporary identity. As a profession, social work is more than an academic discipline; it has a body of knowledge and a methodology of practice which is unique to its professional identity. The social work profession began by making deviant individuals fit into the status quo of society; its lens on individual adjustment to existing mainstream tended to legitimize the status quo. However, in practice, many professionals are increasingly focusing on mobilizing collective actions for social transformation in a manner that makes democracy work for all Indian citizens. In this sense, the central identity of the profession of social work is to prepare informed and active citizens who engage to make society and its governance democratic and accountable. To ensure this, the current and new professionals in social work need to create mechanisms for benchmarking and upholding standards of learning and practice.

Concerted efforts need to be made to promote learning and practice of Participatory Research in social sciences. For this, certain intermediary civil society organizations can act as a bridge between universities and communities. PRIA had partnered with Association of Schools of Social Work in India (ASSWI) to bring Participatory Research and participation of the excluded in the curriculum and teaching of social work education. This experience suggests that quality enhancement in the era of rapid expansion of social work education can indeed be challenging. A recent report suggests that nearly two-third of all private colleges are set up by politicians and realtors; that may indicate growing concerns about quality of learning and seriousness of practice of this profession.

While 'elders' in the profession may take certain steps to deal with this situation, the students of social work need to organize themselves to demand better quality learning opportunities in all colleges; if the students want to be treated as future professionals, they must act in a manner that enhances their learning of the profession's practices and knowledge in a serious manner. They need to take responsibility for their own learning. If students can become active learners – lifelong and life wide – then the purpose of higher education is served well. They need to look at the curriculum and pedagogy and say if it makes sense to them. Passive students in a university are wasting opportunities. On the other hand, the teachers need to stimulate and challenge students for collective, social and individual learning. Socially responsible teaching is to encourage students to become active learners, to challenge them to get out of their zones of comfort and confront reality around them, and to look at societal challenges as learning opportunities.

Hope for the Future

Moving ahead into the future, PRIA aims to create an Alliance of Community Engagement (ACE). It perceives this alliance as a change maker, a steering mechanism which brings together champions of community engagement from different fields on a common platform. This alliance will work towards mainstreaming CUE in regular academia and foresee other ways and means of ensuring this integration and promoting it.

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